

AWARDS 2007 AUDIO

EXPERT'S REPORT

2007 has been a quiet year for hard disk-based MP3 players. This is hardly surprising, as the latest flash memory-based players offer up to 16GB capacity and beat hard disk-based players for compactness and durability. Sandisk's e200-series of players has impressed us with its quality and value for over a year, and at £80 for the 8GB version, it wins our Best Audio Product of 2007 award.

The other awards reflect the varied nature of PC audio products. The speakers or headphones that come bundled with PCs and portable players are often poor quality. Our winning sets address this problem. Meanwhile, Tapco's sound card is a fantastic starter-pack for music production – find out what you can do with it in our feature on page 147.

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SANDISK Sansa e280

The falling cost of flash memory means that flash-based MP3 players now offer many gigabytes of storage at easily affordable prices. These players are smaller than their hard disk-based counterparts, generally have a longer battery life and, with no moving parts, are more durable, too.

Sandisk's e200-series of players is a case in point. The 4GB e260 picked up a Budget Buy award back in September 2006, while the 6GB e270 and 8GB e280 walked off with Best Buy awards in our February and November 2007 *Labs* tests. A large part of their success was down to extremely attractive pricing. At £106, the 8GB e280 had one of the lowest costs per gigabyte in last month's test. Just four weeks later, its price has come down even further, and it is now available for £80. This capacity and price is perfect for most people, providing enough room for 1,500 tracks encoded at 128Kbit/s, and at a price that you don't have to be an affluent music buff to justify.

It's not just the e280's capacity and price that earn it our Best Audio Product award, though. Sound quality is excellent, with a clean output even at high volumes. Boosting frequencies with the Custom EQ setting can cause distortion, but the EQ presets cut rather than boost frequencies to avoid this. Meanwhile, the headphones are well above average, with reasonable bass response and excellent treble detail. Battery life is long at over 18 hours, and USB transfers are reasonable at just over 2MB/s.

The Sansa isn't short of features, either, with a voice recorder function and a MicroSD slot to expand

the capacity; 2GB cards currently cost only £15. The 1.8in colour screen displays photos and videos, and although they don't look as good as on the 2½in screens used by other players, it's a welcome feature that's great to find at this price. The bundled Media Converter utility makes light work of converting photos and videos to the correct format and copying them to the player, while the excellent Windows Media Player 11 is used for music management. The player's controls (including the blue backlit dial) aren't quite as elegant as the iPod's famous click wheel, but menus are friendly, straightforward and quick to browse large music libraries.

If you want to carry your entire music collection around with you, a hard disk-based player such as the newly announced 80GB or 160GB iPod Classic is still the way forward. However, if you're happy to pick your 150 favourite albums, Sandisk's e280 is a considerably more compact and affordable alternative, leaving you enough cash to splash out on some fantastic headphones such as the Audio Technica set, below.

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface **PART CODE** SDMX4-8192-A70 **LATEST PRICE** £80 inc VAT from www.play.com **DETAILS** www.sandisk.com **FULL REVIEW** Nov 2007



TAPCO Link.USB

Tapco's Link.USB is an ideal sound card for musicians. Pristine audio quality is a good start, but just as crucial is its ASIO driver, which ensures efficient performance when used with music-production software. Two XLR inputs let you connect professional microphones, and the hardware controls are preferable to software utilities.

The thing that separates the Link.USB from similar devices by M-Audio, Edirol and others is the quality of its bundled software. Mackie Traktion is the best sub-£100 recording software available, and is worth the £69 price on its own. Add microphones and studio monitor speakers and you have a recording setup that's ready for release-quality music production.



USB AUDIO INTERFACE Stereo mic/line inputs, line and headphone outputs, USB Hi-Speed interface. Requires Windows XP SP2 or Mac OS X 10.3 **PART CODE** 501505642 **LATEST PRICE** £69 inc VAT from www.dolphinmusic.co.uk **DETAILS** www.tapcoworld.com **FULL REVIEW** Apr 2007



IRHYTHMS A-211

2007 has been a busy year for iPod-docking speakers. They are ideal for enjoying your MP3 collection without having to switch on your PC. The compact designs most manufacturers favour aren't ideal for providing good sound quality, and the fee Apple charges for its Made for iPod certification means that most iPod-compatible speakers are poor value compared to standard PC speakers.

Irhythms' A-211 bucks this trend. The conventional subwoofer-based design provides much deeper bass and louder overall volumes than all-in-one designs and it produces very high-quality sound, making it well suited for use with iPods and computers.



IPOD DOCK SPEAKERS 2.1 configuration, 133W RMS power, compatible with all docking iPods and first-generation Shuffle, auxiliary line input **PART CODE** LN16326 **LATEST PRICE** £106 inc VAT from www.scan.co.uk **DETAILS** www.irhythms.com **FULL REVIEW** Oct 2007



AUDIO TECHNICA QuietPoint ATH-ANC7

Audio Technica's headphones and microphones are well known in professional circles; the ATH-ANC7 is part of the company's first foray into consumer electronics. The set has a level of clarity that surpasses any other headphones or speakers we've reviewed in *Shopper*, and is a huge improvement over those bundled with MP3 players.

The enclosed design and active noise-cancelling technology greatly reduces background noise, allowing it to be used at comfortable levels in noisy environments such as public transport.

The ATH-ANC7 isn't cheap, but its quality more than makes up for it. If you've spent £100 on an MP3 player, you'll find this an equally rewarding investment.



NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES 3½mm stereo jack plug plus ¼in and airline adaptors, 1.6m cable, weighs 200g, requires one AAA battery **PART CODE** ATH-ANC7 **LATEST PRICE** £99 inc VAT from www.dv247.com **DETAILS** www.athheadphones.com **FULL REVIEW** Jul 2007

APPLE

iPod Nano



£129 inc VAT

The latest version of the iPod Nano looks very different to its predecessor. The long, lean shape has been replaced by a shorter, wider design that houses a 2in screen with a 320x240 resolution for video playback.

The looks may take some getting used to, but we found the new Nano easy to hold and very comfortable to use. Build quality is up to the usual sturdy and durable level we've come to expect, although the shiny back picked up fingerprints and scratches too easily.

The interface has changed slightly, but will be familiar to anyone who's used previous versions. The menu occupies half the screen, and an image of the selected video or album fills the remainder. Menus are easy to navigate and can be modified to show only the options you want. A Podcasts menu makes it easy to keep track of downloaded files, and the Cover Flow option allows you to browse your music collection by scrolling through album covers.

The Nano has clean treble tones and a rich sound. There's no custom EQ mixer, though, and the EQ options are the same as those on the old Nano. In fact, previous iPods and Nanos suffered from a problem that led to some tracks sounding distorted if a bass-boosted EQ setting was selected.



Fortunately, this has been fixed now and bass tones are clear and powerful.

The standard iPod headphones haven't changed, and they detracted from the comfort and clarity of the listening experience. They leak sound badly, and sound rather dull and murky. Like the iPod Shuffle, the Nano now helpfully pauses itself if the headphones are unplugged.

For many, it's the ability to play videos that makes the new Nano so compelling. Unlike other video players, there's no need to turn the Nano on its side to watch videos thanks to the wider body that accommodates the screen longways. Video looked great, with bright, realistic colours and wide viewing angles. There were no unwanted colour tints or visible pixels and even shadowy areas retained detail.

The Nano can handle MPEG4 and H.264 files, but these won't play correctly unless they're already the correct resolution. You can use iTunes to convert some incompatible video files into the appropriate format and resolution, but

this was time consuming and many of our converted videos had no sound. Fortunately, there are several free third-party video converters available that are more effective.

We were impressed by the Nano's improved audio quality and excellent performance as a video player, although we would have liked better headphones. It did well in our battery life tests, playing audio for 30 hours and 44 minutes and video for five hours and 14 minutes. In spite of problems converting video with iTunes, this is one of the best pocket players available and at £99 for 4GB and £129 for 8GB it's great value.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

- ☒ Excellent video quality
- ☒ Good battery life
- ☒ Disappointing headphones

MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity, supports MP3, Wav, AAC, Protected AAC, Audible, Apple Lossless and AIFF audio, JPEG image, H.264 and MPEG4 video (with limitations), USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MB257ZO/A
SUPPLIER store.apple.com/Apple/WebObjects/ukstore
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk

IRIVER
Clix 2 8GB

£179 inc VAT



Iriver's Clix 2 is a miniature multimedia player with 8GB of flash memory, a 2.2in screen and a resolution of 320x240. It has a battery life of three hours and 43 minutes for video playback and a spectacular 31 hours and five minutes for audio. A useful Power & Play mode lets you continue to use the player even while it's plugged into the USB port.

The directional controls for the menus are concealed beneath the front panel of the Clix, so just squeeze the player at the edge of the direction in which you want to navigate. The other controls are marked only by symbols on the back of the player, which makes them hard to distinguish.

The Clix produces clear sound, but very low tones aren't audible without boosting the bass. There are a lot of EQ and 3D settings available, but most failed to make our music sound better. The bundled headphones are comfortable, but they sound rather muddy and unclear, particularly on busy tracks with a lot of musical detail.

The screen is crisp and doesn't suffer from visible graining, but its colours aren't as accurate as those of the iPod Nano. WMV and AVI videos looked slightly oversaturated and underexposed, with too many shadowed areas and too much intensity on dark colours.

We were also disappointed by fundamental problems such as an inability to list tracks in album order and a confusing button layout. At a lower price, these would be easy to forgive, but this expensive player has too many flaws to justify its price.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

- ☒ Excellent battery life for audio
- ☒ Can play while charging via USB
- ☒ Expensive; can't list tracks in order

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER, 8GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE CLIX28GB
SUPPLIER www.advancedmp3players.co.uk
DETAILS www.iriver.com

SHURE
SE110

£70 inc VAT



Shure is best known for its professional audio equipment, including headphones used by musicians to monitor their performance on stage. The SE110 ear-canal headphones are the latest addition to its consumer range.

These sound-isolating headphones come with a variety of detachable sleeves designed to shut out background noise. The most effective are earplug-style foam sleeves, which are compressed as you push them into your ears and then expand to fit the ear canal. Since this physically blocks outside noise, there are no undesirable audio artefacts such as the high-pitched hiss often produced by headphones with active noise cancellation.

When we wore the SE110s, the outside world was virtually inaudible, and music sounded incredible thanks to the high-quality speakers. Treble and mid-range tones are crystal clear, while the bass is powerful and well defined. The tight fit and excellent audio quality gave us a great listening experience even at low volumes, and we could easily hear subtle details in high-bit rate MP3s and uncompressed CD-quality audio.

The cables and connectors are thicker and heavier than those of other headphones, and the expanding foam sleeves felt odd at first. We also found it strange to have to loop the cable over the top and around the back of our ear, but after getting used to it we didn't want to go back to using normal in-ear headphones.

Although the SE110s are hardly cheap, these are the least expensive headphones that Shure makes, and the sheer quality of their sound makes them well worth the money.

Kat Orphanides

SUMMARY

- ☒ Excellent audio quality
- ☒ Isolate background noise
- ☒ Heavy cables; expensive

IN-EAR HEADPHONES Two pairs foam sleeves, 3 pairs soft flex sleeves, 91cm cable
PART CODE SE110
SUPPLIER www.shure.co.uk
DETAILS www.shure.co.uk